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Dear Johnny,

I have just received your undated letter postmarked 28 Ocotober (such are the vagaries of international mail these days) informing me of your interest in a round robin type article on the general topic of "fog of war". Hopefully it is not too late to send you my initial entry. I take it you are planning a couple of cycles or more. I think the introduction you send along is a good jump off point for a number of angles on the topic, though it seems mainly aimed at telling gamers as much as possible of what goes on in the program and assumes that limited intelligence is a standard aspect of computer games, both dubious prospects. I will try to take one aspect of those possible below, assuming other aspects can come later.

TOUCHING THE REAL

As often happens at the start of any discussion of merit, I think first off we need to define our terms a bit so at least we know what we are talking about. The terms "fog of war" and "limited intelligence" are often used interchangably, but really limited intelligence is a subset of fog of war. Limited intelligence is itself a general term, encompassing two forms of limitation of information passed to the player (or unit commanding officer, or overall commander of the depicted group).

The first limitation is that of observation. This is the more commonly depicted form of limited intelligence in that its primary effect is to reduce the details available to the player (or CO) on the status of the opposition. These information reductions can be done in two principle areas: opposing strength and opposing location.

The second limitation is that of organization. For simplicity this can be called "viewpoint". In any event the commander is a particular person in a particular position and in any simulation worthy of the term the player must represent that person (in general) and that position (in particular).

While the effects of observational intelligence limitation are fairly obvious (not knowing where the second enemy division is since it is no longer in the combat line and air recon is shut in by bad weather, or not knowing the strength of the first enemy division past that it is beating back your current attack with apparent ease), those of viewpoint are less so, since they deal with information that will not be available for reasons of structure (that is, the staff people in your third battalion did not mention in their daily report that 1/5 of their men have stomach flu, or it might be food posioning after last night's lukewarm turkey dinner, or even more likely, if they did mention it one of the five other people the report had to be read and rewritten by before it got to you left it out because he too was not feeling all that well that day).

This then brings us back to "fog of war", which itself covers all of the above, as well as the heart of affairs on the battlefield as described by Clausewitz in his enduring classic of the military art ON WAR, namely "friction". Friction is the term used to cover everything that does not go as planned, which is most everything in the average battle. And the actions of such friction on the player are the center of the unhappyness of the introduction to this round robin discussion on Fog Of War. Well, I have an answer. Tough!

Lets get down to hard facts here and stop the nonsense. What do you want in your computer game? Do you want a simulation? Since all of these games deal with some sort of historic topic and most call themselves simulations, I will assume you actually want history and reality as major aspects, or we have degenerated to hypocracy. Do you want to learn something about command? Since I have yet to see a computer game which makes the player a riflemen just getting shot at while the computer is his commanding officer, I will assume that the buying public is not out to try out being a grunt. Well if you want a commanding position in a realistic depiction of an historical event, then perhaps a bit of frustration is not out of place.

Do you really think that battles occur as the commanders of the involved forces wish them to? If so, you have never read history. No battle works as planned. None ever has and none ever will. I think it was one of the Molkes that talked about no battle plan surviving contact with the enemy. Well, when your carefully planned attack goes wrong, welcome to the real world. Do you really want to know everything about your forces and the enemies? If so, why are you playing a computer game? Board games are great at letting you know pretty much everything and they cost a lot less.

But perhaps you are the lazy person mentioned in the introduction that really just wants an opposing player always present, someone to do the logistics, and someone to take care of the rules. Not really very interested in learning much. Well, you can do that too. Most of the computer wargames out there are just what you are after. They may not have printed maps and playing pieces, instead relying on graphics on the computer screen, but they are board games none the less. They have perfect intelligence, perfect command, and no friction. Pretty much everything goes just like the player wants (unless there really is a bug) in these types of games. But lets not deceive ourselves, these are not simulations. No more than their board counterparts were. They are simply games, with the color of an historical event added on.

As a certain monarch's spouse learned, you cannot have your cake and eat it too. With simulation comes reality, and all its uncomfortable aspects (though it should be pointed out that your computer gaming room is probably warm and cozy and when you make a mistake only electrons die). Real computer simulation games are out there. Nearly every company in this field is starting to do a few such titles and some do only fog of war types work, though most firms still mainly do the old style of computerized board game. So take your

choice. But lets stop the complaining if the ones that try to take you a step into realistic shoes also occasionally leave you confused, of frustrated, or even thinking about what the hell it was that just happened to you. That is what they should do.

Stephen Newberg
director, Simulations Canada

Hows that for a first round? Hopefully we can get back to the other topics started by the definition discussions in later rounds, though it will stand on its own as preliminaries to this piece if there are no further rounds (I am not clear from you letter how you intend to handle this, mechanically).

Sincerely,

Stephen Newberg
cc:hdc/L.